

THE HAENYEO PROJECT

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Abstract

The Haenyeo Project is a 22-minute grounded science fiction film set in 1990's Northern Ontario, following 16-year-old Jane, a second-generation Korean-Canadian, as she confronts identity, cultural belonging, and a mysterious family legacy. After discovering her estranged grandmother, an elderly Haenyeo diver who transforms into a sea creature, Jane wonders if she has inherited this rare ability.

Blending speculative fiction with cultural history, the film reimagines the real-world Haenyeo of Jeju Island as carriers of ancestral power. The project explores how grounded sci-fi can illuminate immigrant experiences and intergenerational trauma. Developed through primary and secondary research, location shooting, and character-driven storytelling, the film reflects the filmmaker's personal negotiation of cultural hybridity. This MFA thesis support paper documents the film's development from concept to completion and argues that science fiction rooted in lived realities can challenge dominant narratives, reframing difference as strength and offering alternative ways to understand belonging, inheritance, and transformation.

Scholars, researchers and fellow filmmakers who wish to view my thesis film can contact me at: camilor@yorku.ca. Please explain your interest and confirm that it is for personal/private research purposes only, and that you will respect my copyright and not screen my film publicly in any manner.

Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by expressing my deepest gratitude to the person who has always believed in this project, its potential as a story, and as a narrative that brought together my emotions and aesthetic interests in an unexpected way. More than anything, she has always believed in me and encouraged me to give my best: Ana, my partner, my best friend, and the love of my life.

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I hope that one day we will see Grandma emerge from the water again, and Jane discovering more about her past, and the future of the Haenyeo.

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1. Introduction

This support paper accompanies *The Haenyeo Project*, a science fiction short film that tells the story of three generations of women bound by a dark family secret. Told from the perspective of a second-generation Korean-Canadian teenager, the film draws inspiration from the Haenyeo (female free-divers) of Jeju Island and imagines a hidden transformation that challenges familial bonds and inherited identity. As the story unfolds, it examines how secrecy, displacement, and cross-generational estrangement shape lives across time and geography.

Initially developed as a television series concept, the project later evolved into a short-form proof-of-concept that could be developed as an academic production. This shift in format posed a number of creative and logistical challenges, particularly around preserving the original story's scope while adapting it into a more intimate, character-driven short. Central to this process was the pursuit of a grounded science fiction style, one that privileges real-world logic and human experience, even when it introduces speculative elements. The project's development raised a series of creative, cultural, and ethical questions that guide the structure of this paper and inform its critical reflections. The answers draw on my own identity, the relationship between this identity and the cultural specificity of the Haenyeo, as well as the use of grounded sci-fi as both an emotional and aesthetic storytelling tool. Specifically, throughout the following chapters, I address the following questions:

- 1) How can a (male, Colombian) filmmaker responsibly navigate the ethical and creative challenges of representing a culturally specific, female-centered narrative while drawing from personal experiences of migration and dislocation?

- 2) What role does cultural specificity play in crafting a universal narrative about care, secrecy, and reconciliation between generations?
- 3) How can a speculative transformation rooted in Jeju Island's historical events be used to explore intergenerational trauma within diasporic narratives?
- 4) What defines a grounded science fiction aesthetic, and how can it be applied to adapt a broader series concept into an intimate short film?
- 5) What strategies, both narrative and logistical, support the realization of this tone within the practical constraints of a student film production?

This paper situates these questions within relevant theoretical, conceptual and practical frameworks and explores their implications through the details of the production process. The project incorporates a combination of primary and secondary research, fieldwork conducted during a research and shooting trip to South Korea, and a series of tangible, behind-the-scenes decisions that reflect the creative and logistical demands of realizing a science fiction story within the context of a student film.

2. Origins of the idea

The origins of *The Haenyeo Project* can be traced back to 2012. At that time, I had recently completed a Bachelor's degree in Filmmaking and Television in Bogotá, Colombia (2010), and had co-founded a small production company, which ceased operations by the end of 2011 after struggling to align its commercial activities with its creative ambitions. In search of new experiences and creative renewal, I took a position as a photographer and videographer aboard cruise ships. This role offered the opportunity to travel extensively while documenting guest excursions at international ports. Among the many places I visited during this period, one destination left an enduring impression on me: Jeju Island, South Korea. It was during an excursion there, while filming as part of the ship's onboard media team, that I first encountered the Haenyeo.

It was a brisk morning when two elderly local women began making their way along the rocky shore, carefully navigating the uneven terrain. They wore simple swimsuits and single-lens goggles, with green nets and bright orange buoys strapped to their backs. Soon, more women dressed similarly joined them at the water's edge. As they slowly waded into the sea, an astonishing transformation took place. Gone was the hesitation from the beach; in the water, they moved with effortless speed and coordination. It was as though they had slipped into their natural element, unburdened by age or gravity. Diving without any breathing equipment, they expertly gathered shellfish, conch, abalone, and other treasures from the depths below.

Their laughter, vitality, and extraordinary transformation stayed with me for a long time. I began reading about the Haenyeo and discovered their resilience and central role within both family and society. Despite the cultural and geographic distance, they

reminded me of my aunts, grandmother, and mother in Colombia: strong, independent women who worked tirelessly for the well-being of their loved ones.

At the end of 2016, my wife and I moved to Canada. While beginning to establish a professional career in a new country, I continued to think about story ideas that could be written and developed within this new context. During this period of transition and cultural adjustment, the image of the Haenyeo resurfaced with unexpected clarity. More than a memory, it began to take on symbolic resonance: a representation of hidden strength and resilience beneath a seemingly fragile or unassuming exterior.

This metaphor spoke directly to the experience of migration and the sense of invisibility or dislocation often felt by newcomers navigating unfamiliar systems and identities. Drawing from these personal reflections, the initial concept for *The Haenyeo Project* began to take shape: the story of an elderly Korean woman from Jeju Island, now living in Canada, who secretly possesses the ability to transform into a sea creature when she enters the water. While the premise held significant narrative potential, merging speculative elements with deeply human concerns, it also raised one of the central research questions explored in this paper: How can a male Colombian filmmaker responsibly navigate the ethical and creative challenges of representing a culturally specific, female-centered narrative while drawing from personal experiences of migration and dislocation?

3. Ethical Issues in Cross-Cultural Storytelling.

From the beginning, this was one of the most pressing concerns shaping *The Haenyeo Project*. The story is rooted in the legacy of the Haenyeo of Jeju Island, a community whose history, labour, and significance are deeply intertwined with Korean cultural identity. Engaging with such material as an outsider requires more than creative interest; it requires ethical rigour, cultural sensitivity, and self-awareness.

Telling a story inspired by another culture is never a neutral act. It demands a balance between the imaginative possibilities of fiction and the responsibility of ethical representation. For this project, that balance began with a commitment to grounding the narrative in both primary and secondary research. Primary research took the form of fieldwork: a production trip to Jeju Island, which will be discussed later in this paper, was designed not only to shoot a key scene but to make direct contact with the world and community that had initially inspired the story. Meeting Haenyeo face-to-face, observing their work, and experiencing the landscape of Jeju first-hand transformed my project's perception. It allowed the fictional narrative to be informed by lived detail rather than constructed at a distance.

Secondary research played an equally foundational role. Works such as Y. Zin's *Haenyeo: Women Divers of Korea*¹ and Lisa See's *The Island of Sea Women*², which will be described in detail in an upcoming chapter, provided valuable historical, emotional, and cultural context. Besides supplying factual information, these books conveyed the atmosphere, interpersonal dynamics, and emotional legacies that come with a life spent

¹ Y. Zin: *Women Divers of Korea* (Seoul: Hollym, 2017).

² Lisa See, *The Island of Sea Women* (New York: Scribner, 2019).

between land and sea. Examining them helped clarify the stakes of telling a story set against this cultural backdrop, while also setting a standard for how such stories should be approached: with humility, clarity, and respect for complexity.

However, research alone was not enough to represent the complexity and cultural specificity of the Haenyeo. What ultimately anchored the ethical stance of *The Haenyeo Project* was a sense of personal resonance. Although as a Colombian man I don't share the cultural or geographic origins of the Haenyeo, I do share a set of emotional and thematic concerns: the inheritance of silence, the fragmentation of memory, the strain between generations shaped by migration, and the dislocation that comes with building a life in a new place. These personal experiences did not replace cultural research; rather, they created a framework through which empathy could be extended across cultural lines. In this way, the film became less an act of cultural translation and more a shared inquiry into what it means to carry invisible histories within the body.

This is where the diasporic lens proved particularly useful. As a Colombian immigrant living in Canada, I approached the Korean-Canadian context not as a representative voice, but as someone who understood the emotional texture of in-betweenness, of living in the space between languages, traditions, and expectations. This allowed the story to focus not on generalized cultural depictions but on specific emotional relationships: between mother and daughter, grandmother and granddaughter, tradition and rupture. The speculative transformation at the heart of the story became a metaphor not only for inherited trauma but for the shifting sense of identity that marks so many immigrant and diasporic experiences.

Ultimately, this project did not set out to speak for the Haenyeo or to represent Korean culture in totality. Instead, it sought to build a fictional world that acknowledged and engaged with real histories, while grounding those elements in an emotionally honest narrative. The aim was not to fictionalize lived experiences for dramatic effect, but to approach them with care, curiosity, and a commitment to portraying cultural specificity without reducing it to aesthetic or narrative clichés. By doing so, *The Haenyeo Project* seeks to position itself as a work of cross-cultural storytelling, one that does not erase difference, but attempts to hold it with integrity. With these ethical considerations in place, the discussion now turns to the cultural and historical context that first inspired this project: the lived realities and symbolic resonance of the Haenyeo.

4. Between Land and Sea: The World of the *Haenyeo*

*“On the mainland, halmeoni means ‘grandmother.’ On Jeju, in a fitting example of the respect in which women are held for their strength, independence, and persistence, halmang means both ‘grandmother’ and ‘goddess.’”*³

Before the grandmother’s character in the film could be written with authenticity, it was essential to understand the world from which she emerged. The *Haenyeo* of Jeju Island are more than skilled free-divers; they serve as cultural bearers, custodians of tradition, and enduring symbols of intergenerational resilience. The term *Haenyeo*, meaning “women of the sea,” refers to the female divers of Jeju who harvest seafood and seaweed without the aid of breathing equipment⁴.

Jeju Island lies south of mainland Korea, about an hour’s flight from Seoul. While *Haenyeo* communities also exist along other coastal areas, they hold particular significance on this picturesque island. Thanks to its location, climate, and distinct culture, Jeju has become a popular tourist destination. Major cities like Tokyo, Taipei, and Beijing are all within a two-hour flight.

Upon arriving at Jeju’s international airport, one immediately senses how deeply the *Haenyeo* are woven into the island’s culture. Not only have they become an iconic

³ Lisa See, *The Island of Sea Women* (New York: Scribner, 2019).

⁴ Kyeonghwa Byun, Eun-Jung Kang, Changgen Yoo and Kyu-Han Kim, “Spatial Transformation and Functions of Bulteok as Space for *Haenyeo* on Jeju Island, Korea” (2015), quoted in Jwa, “Ecological Spatiality of *Haenyeo* Culture in Jeju Island, Korea,” *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering* 16, no. 3 (2017): 533–540, <https://doi.org/10.3130/jaabe.14.533>

symbol, widely recognized around the world and frequently used for tourism promotion, but they also command genuine respect and admiration among the locals. The Haenyeo embody the resilient spirit of Jeju women, braving the harsh natural environment as part of their daily work.



Figure 1. Project Group: Seed, [Female], 2019. Mixed materials (discarded female diver's uniform, sea driftwood). A collaboration between the project group and female divers. Haenyeo Museum, Jeju, South Korea. Photo by the author.

For centuries, these lands have witnessed the Haenyeo labouring from dawn to dusk, serving as the primary breadwinners for their families across generations. Their work is steeped in tradition, accompanied by labour songs, shamanistic rituals, and the distinctive tools of their trade. While diving is central to their identity, it is not their only task. Often reserved for the afternoons, weather permitting, diving is balanced with morning responsibilities that include tending to the household and cultivating crops such as barley, sweet potatoes, radishes, chilli peppers, garlic, and more.



Figure 2. Ana Casas, Behind-the-scenes photograph of four Haenyeo performers in costume, Jeju Island, South Korea, August 2024. Unpublished.

In 2016, the Haenyeo of Jeju were recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, a milestone that brought much-needed global visibility to their community. Unfortunately, this recognition comes at a time when their numbers are

declining rapidly, putting their traditions at risk. During the mid-20th century, economic development in Jeju provided women with new job opportunities and improved access to education. As a result, Haenyeo populations have been in steady decline since the 1960s, and most active Haenyeo today are in their 60's or older⁵. Compounding these challenges, the Haenyeo, whose livelihood depends entirely on the sea, are on the front lines of witnessing climate change and pollution. They see firsthand the discoloration of coral reefs, the abnormal shifts in water temperatures, and a marked decline in the marine species they harvest.

This is powerfully portrayed in Sue Kim's latest documentary feature, *The Last Of The Sea Women*⁶. The film not only highlights the shortage of new recruits but also depicts how younger and older generations of Haenyeo unite against a critical environmental threat: the planned release of radiation-contaminated water from the 2011 Fukushima nuclear accident, located roughly a thousand miles away. Amid this grim scenario, Sue Kim shines a hopeful light on the *halmeonis*. Their indomitable spirit, strong community bonds, and, above all, the power of their warm smiles offer both solace and wisdom. By sharing their knowledge, they remind viewers of the vital importance of respecting nature and the environment.

The fearless spirit of the Haenyeo, their importance in today's climate change discourse, and their transformative presence in the water all came together to inspire and shape *The Haenyeo Project*. Honouring this spirit and history, the story began to take on

⁵ Kyeonghwa Byun, Eun-Jung Kang, Changgen Yoo & Kyu-Han Kim. "Spatial Transformation and Functions of Bulteok as Space for Haenyeo on Jeju Island, Korea" (2015). <https://doi.org/10.3130/jaabe.14.533>

⁶ Sue Kim, dir., *The Last Of Sea Women* (A24, 2024), <https://tv.apple.com/ca/movie/the-last-of-the-sea-women/umc.cmc.2ifcc56qkxiso1w9k6qvw8aow>

deeper dimensions with the emergence of a protagonist: Jane, the estranged granddaughter. As a second-generation Korean Canadian who has grown up detached from her cultural roots, language, and traditions, Jane becomes a narrative counterpoint to her grandmother, who grew up immersed in the traditions of the Haenyeo on Jeju Island. Their encounter is unexpected, uneasy, and ultimately transformative, offering a compelling framework through which to explore intergenerational tension, cultural alienation, and the potential for reconnection across time and experience. This dynamic between cultural specificity and emotional universality raises another guiding question explored in this paper: What role does cultural specificity play in crafting a universal narrative about care, secrecy, and reconciliation between generations? This question will be further explored in the following chapter, where the fictional backstory behind the grandmother's transformation begins to take shape.

5. Primary Sources of Inspiration

The question of how to use cultural specificity in service of a universal narrative within a science fiction context became a recurring point of reflection during the search for inspiration across literature, film, and media. When the project was initially conceived, it was imagined as a television series. The narrative offered multiple layers suited to the extended scope of serialized storytelling. From the outset, it was structured as an intergenerational story grounded in themes of memory, migration, and secrecy, with a coming-of-age trajectory at its emotional core. At that early stage, however, the full narrative potential had yet to be determined. Development efforts focused on formulating a logline, establishing the conceptual framework of the series, identifying its central themes, and drafting preliminary biographical profiles of the main characters. During this foundational process, two literary works emerged as key sources of creative inspiration: Y. Zin's *Haenyeo: Women Divers of Korea* and Lisa See's *The Island of Sea Women*.

During the early stages of research on the Haenyeo, the majority of available materials, including documentaries, news coverage, and photographs, tended to emphasize the dangers and physical toll of their profession. These portrayals often framed the Haenyeo as women who face death daily, enduring extreme conditions as part of their labour. While such representations reflect real aspects of their work, they frequently leaned toward a sombre narrative, overlooking the full scope of their lived experiences. It was in this context that the discovery of Y. Zin's book offered a striking and refreshing contrast. Its cover alone signalled a departure from the prevailing tone: a Haenyeo, still in her wetsuit and goggles after a dive, smiling radiantly into the camera. This image encapsulated a more nuanced perspective: one that acknowledged resilience

but also captured vitality, joy, and dignity. The cover image proved immediately compelling, and as the pages were examined, each photograph evoked a sense of admiration and visual impact.



Figure 3. Y. Zin, Cover of *Haenyeo: Women Divers of Korea* (Seoul: Hollym, 2017), photograph. Accessed May 14, 2025. <https://hollym.com/product/haenyeo-women-divers-korea/>.

A few years later, during the first year of the MFA program, an interview was conducted with Y. Zin as part of an assignment for the Production course taught by

Manfred Becker. In the interview, Zin explained that her project was motivated by a desire to challenge the limited and often somber portrayals of Haenyeo found in school textbooks, where they are typically depicted solely as elderly women enduring physically demanding lives. Through extensive interaction and observation, she came to see them not only as resilient and self-sacrificing figures but also as joyful, energetic individuals who supported one another and took pride in their independence, an understanding that deeply informed the emotional depth and dignity with which the grandmother should be portrayed in the story. For Zin, the Haenyeo embodied the spirit of the modern, self-reliant career woman: strong, brave, and deeply rooted in community.

Y. Zin's photographs and personal testimony were instrumental in reshaping my understanding of the Haenyeo, not as relics of hardships but as complex, vibrant individuals whose strength, joy, and interdependence continue to defy the narrow portrayals found in textbooks and tourist narratives. Her work gave emotional and visual texture to the grandmother's character, grounding her in a lived tradition of resilience and grace.

Engaging with these sources clarified the ways in which cultural specificity could deepen both character development and story structure. As different dimensions of the grandmother's character emerged, they enriched both the image and the narrative possibilities of her role, adding layers of complexity to her relationships with others. Although *The Haenyeo Project* presents the generational dilemma of whether to adopt or reject family traditions within a specific cultural context, the emotional core of that conflict is universal. Audiences from diverse backgrounds can relate to the tension between

inheritance and individual identity, even when it takes shape under different circumstances.

While Y. Zin's perspective offered a personal and aesthetic connection to the Haenyeo, Lisa See's *The Island of Sea Women* facilitated a deeper engagement with the historical context surrounding this culture. The novel illuminated aspects of the Haenyeo's lived experiences, particularly during the Japanese occupation and the Jeju Uprising, that significantly shaped the conceptualization of the intergenerational legacy embedded in the characters. The narrative immediately stood out for its portrayal of a lifelong friendship between two women, traced over several decades. Young-Sook, whose name would later be adopted for the grandmother character, is the daughter of the leader of her village's all-female diving collective and appears destined to follow in her mother's path. In contrast, Mi-ja is the daughter of a Japanese collaborator and bears the social stigma associated with her father's actions.

Their bond is repeatedly tested as they navigate the formative experiences of childhood, the trauma of parental loss, the evolving roles of marriage and motherhood, and the physical dangers of their shared profession. These personal trials unfold against the broader backdrop of Jeju Island's turbulent twentieth-century history, including Japanese colonial rule, World War II, the Korean War, and its aftermath. At its core, the novel poses a deeply resonant question: how is forgiveness possible in the face of betrayal and historical trauma?

However, it was not only the depiction of historical events that proved influential. Equally compelling was the way Lisa See evokes everyday life with textured specificity, the smell of fermenting vegetables in kitchen corners, the rhythm of family rituals, and the

hushed conversations shared in the quiet of night. Her portrayals of domestic life are intimate, immersive, and vividly rendered. Through her storytelling, a world that was culturally distant from my own upbringing was made emotionally accessible and resonant. It was in these quieter moments, as much as in the depictions of historical conflict, that a compelling model emerged for approaching character development, spatial dynamics, and atmosphere within the narrative framework of *The Haenyeo Project*.

This book played a significant role in shaping a timeline that remained coherent and grounded in the sociopolitical context of Korea and the Haenyeo. It provided a historical framework through which the emotional trajectories of the characters could be developed with greater depth and authenticity. Although these narrative elements are not explicitly addressed within the short film, her depiction of the Jeju 4.3 incident, a period of mass political violence that took place on the island between 1948 and 1954, resulting in the deaths of thousands of civilians, was instrumental in identifying a historically grounded and emotionally charged moment for Hana's birth. Positioning her arrival during this era of social unrest allowed for the immediate embedding of loss, trauma, and political rupture into the character's origin, helping to define her psychological landscape from the outset.

Hana's birth is placed in 1948, based on the assumption that her mother, Young Sook, whose early life and reintegration into her community will be explored in the next chapter, could have given birth at the age of 22. This places Young Sook's birth year around 1926, which, while slightly later than the average age of childbirth for women of her generation, remains plausible given her specific circumstances. The grandmother character was conceived as being approximately 70 years old, which situates the present

timeline of the short film in 1996. This year not only aligns coherently with the characters' backstories and generational timelines, but also holds personal significance, as it corresponds to the period of my own childhood, an era associated with nostalgia and formative memory. Additionally, the novel informed key visual and emotional aspects of the flashback scene in the film. The image of Young-Sook praying before the photograph of her deceased husband, the traditional Haenyeo garments she wears, and the landscapes she traverses while confronting rejection from her community, all reflect the atmospheric and thematic influence of See's text.

With this foundation in place the development of the central characters, spanning three generations, could begin to take shape. The following chapter traces the construction of those characters and the intergenerational dynamics that would anchor the narrative.

6. Character Development

With a clearer understanding of the sociocultural and emotional realities surrounding the Haenyeo, the development of the story's intergenerational arc could move forward with greater intentionality. This chapter explores how each of the three central characters (grandmother, mother, and daughter) were conceived and constructed, and how their emotional trajectories reflect the broader themes of legacy, disconnection, and reconciliation. In doing so, it engages with a central question of the project: *How can speculative transformation, rooted in historical events specific to Jeju Island, be used to explore intergenerational trauma within diasporic narratives?* The process of answering this question began by imagining how the consequences of a secret transformation might echo across generations, shaping identities fractured by migration, memory, and silence.

Grandmother Kim Young-Sook: Between silence and survival

The character of Kim Young-Sook emerged slowly, shaped by a sustained process of research, reading, and imaginative projection. Her creation began as a conceptual figure: an elderly Haenyeo woman who holds a mysterious connection to the sea. But she became much more through an evolving understanding of the historical, emotional, and symbolic worlds she might inhabit.

In blending the two main primary sources of inspiration covered in the previous chapter, one visual and observational, the other fictional and emotionally expansive, Young-Sook evolved from a symbolic idea into a lived presence. She became a woman whose silence is not emptiness, but density; someone whose rituals, gestures, and gaze

hold traces of everything she has endured. Her transformation, in the speculative dimension of the story, is not simply fantastical. It is a physical manifestation of an inherited trauma, one that began with historical violence and was compounded by secrecy and shame. As such, her body becomes a kind of archive: an interface between myth, biology, and history.

Although Young-Sook exists on the narrative margins because she is introduced late in life, estranged from her daughter and unknown to her granddaughter, she is, in many ways, the gravitational center of the story. She represents a submerged lineage, both literal and figurative, whose reemergence disrupts the carefully managed normalcy of the present. Her potential encounter with Jane is more than a reunion; it is a collision between generations, between what is forgotten and what demands to be remembered.

In building this character, the question that remained constant was not only what she had endured, but how she continued to live, how she moved through the world with so much buried beneath the surface. What might it mean for her to be seen, finally, as something more than a vessel of secrecy? And what ripple effect might that have on those who come after her?

Hana: The Daughter Who Turned Away

If Kim Young-Sook's character was formed through a convergence of historical trauma and cultural myth, her daughter Hana emerged as the product of rupture, a generational fracture born not only from loss and secrecy but from the deep emotional costs of survival. Conceived in the aftermath of war and raised amidst the unspoken

consequences of violence, Hana's character became the narrative bridge between inherited history and an unwilling future. Where her mother bore the burden of transformation with quiet dignity, Hana would become the one who resisted it.

Hana grew up in a postwar Jeju marked by grief and the social tensions that followed the island's violent past. Unlike her mother, who continued to dive and serve her community, Hana rejected both the physical act of diving and what it symbolized. As a child, she was mocked by her peers and alienated from a tradition that demanded sacrifice and strength. Her transformation, triggered like her mother's when submerged in water, was not seen as empowering, but instead felt like a curse. This rejection of her inherited identity created a deep divide between her and Young-Sook, one defined not by confrontation but by emotional absence.

As soon as she could, Hana left Jeju behind. On the mainland, she pursued a path that would give her control over her body and her future. She studied biology and eventually helped develop a compound that suppressed her transformation. For Hana, this scientific intervention offered more than stability, it offered erasure. When she eventually moved to Canada and gave birth to her daughter, Jane, she ensured that the compound would keep the mutation dormant. Her goal was to raise a child unmarked by the past, untouched by the trauma and bodily difference that had defined her own life. However, this control came at a cost: she became a distant, emotionally closed figure, driven by fear and scientific rigour rather than maternal warmth.

By the time the story of *The Haenyeo Project* unfolds, Hana is a single mother working for a powerful marine research firm. Her relationship with Jane is tense and disconnected, defined by routine, control, and unspoken secrets. Hana's silence mirrors

that of her mother, repeating a cycle of emotional withholding. But unlike Young-Sook, who believed in passing down tradition, Hana's life has been shaped by an urgent desire to suppress it. Her character stands at the center of the story's central dilemma: what is inherited, and what must be broken in order to move forward.

Jane: The Dormant Sea

Once the emotional arc of the grandmother had been established and Hana's conflicted legacy revealed, Jane emerged as the final link in this intergenerational narrative. As the granddaughter of a woman transformed by war and the daughter of a scientist determined to suppress that legacy, Jane became the embodiment of inherited silence, and the one most likely to break it. Her character allowed the project to explore how intergenerational trauma can resurface in subtle, personal ways, particularly during the formative years of adolescence.

Set in 1996, the story follows Jane at age sixteen. Brilliant, self-reliant, and emotionally guarded, she excels in school but lives in quiet isolation. While her academic achievements create the appearance of control and confidence, beneath that surface lies a deep longing for connection and resentment toward the strict, emotionally distant mother who governs her world. Jane's relationship with Hana is defined by structure and silence. Hana monitors her daughter's schedule, achievements, and injections with clinical precision, determined to maintain the illusion of normalcy and keep the past buried. However, Jane senses that something is off; something in her body, in her family history, in the way her mother reacts to certain questions.

That sense of disconnection begins to shift with the unexpected arrival of her grandmother. Though Jane does not yet understand who this woman is or what she represents, the encounter destabilizes the controlled world her mother has built. In the days that follow, Jane will be confronted with a choice: to continue living under her mother-imposed narrative or to begin uncovering the truth about herself and the strange legacy she carries. Her arc, caught between resistance and discovery, lies at the heart of the project's premise and grounds its themes in the emotional reality of a teenager caught between generations, cultures, and identities.

At this point, a framework had been established in which Jeju Island's historical trauma could inform the transformation connecting my characters. The next challenge was to translate the broader television series concept into a feasible short film, one that could be executed within the creative and logistical parameters of a student production. Three generations of women, bound by a dark family secret, were the core of this story. Now came the creative challenge: to compress this essence into the brief language of a short film.

7. From Series Concept to Short Film: The Adaptation Challenge

Adapting *The Haenyeo Project* from a serialized television concept into a short film required a careful balance of precision, intuition, and constraint. From the outset, the short was envisioned as a “grounded sci-fi” piece, an approach that allowed for speculative storytelling within a realistic and achievable production framework. This raises a central question for the adaptation process: What defines a grounded science fiction aesthetic, and how can it be applied to adapt a broader series concept into an intimate short film?

A science fiction approach emerged organically, an offshoot of my longstanding affinity with magical realism, where the extraordinary is seamlessly woven into the fabric of everyday life. That sensibility naturally aligned with what is often referred to as “grounded science fiction”: a mode of sci-fi storytelling that resists spectacle in favour of emotional plausibility and realism. Rather than unfolding in distant futures or technologically saturated worlds, grounded science fiction anchors its speculative elements in familiar environments and human experiences. These elements are introduced with restraint and are often subordinate to character development and emotional truth, preserving the audience’s connection to the world and those who inhabit it.

This choice allowed *The Haenyeo Project* to avoid mythologizing the Haenyeo as magical beings, a frequent impulse in outsider representations. Instead, the speculative element of transformation is constructed as a biological and psychological consequence of historical trauma. The transformation was never meant to be ethereal or symbolic; it was imagined as a raw, corporeal process, deeply embedded in the character’s body and memory. Drawing from marine species native to Jeju Island, the transformation design

incorporates organic textures such as coral formations, abalone shells, and octopus-like suction marks, evoking both adaptation and stigma.

Visually, the goal was to root the transformation in realism, anchoring the extraordinary within ordinary, lived environments. The speculative event would not occur in isolated or fantastical settings, but in intimate, familiar spaces such as a bathtub or a quiet lakeshore. These locations were deliberately chosen to heighten the emotional impact of the rupture. Colour design and wardrobe planning also reflect this intention: Jane's domestic world is defined by earthy, restrained tones, while the grandmother's presence introduces aquatic hues, signalling her deeper connection to the sea. The transformation itself was planned as a moment of narrative and visual rupture: unsettling, physical, and emotionally charged, and intended to mark the collision between inherited trauma and personal awakening. This aesthetic and narrative strategy is integral to grounding the science fiction component within a character-driven, emotionally resonant short film format.

One of the most pivotal moments in this adaptation process occurred during the course *Selected Topics in Screenwriting*, taught by Karen Walton. She immediately connected with the intergenerational aspect of the story, particularly the ways in which three women navigate a dark family secret. A shared interest in creature narratives further shaped the development of the story, with particular inspiration drawn from one of her most notable screenwriting works: *Ginger Snaps*⁷. This landmark Canadian horror film employs the bodily transformation of a teenage girl as a powerful metaphor for rage,

⁷ John Fawcett, dir. *Ginger Snaps* (Oddbod Productions, 2000), <https://www.ctv.ca/movies/ginger-snaps>

identity, and female adolescence. Its integration of grounded, character-driven storytelling with mythic and monstrous elements closely aligned with the aims of *The Haenyeo Project*. Moreover, its development and production within the Canadian film landscape rendered it a particularly resonant model for the creative and logistical ambitions of this adaptation.

In selecting which part of the broader narrative to adapt into a short film, the creative process returned to the project's foundational image: a teenage girl, Jane, pushing her grandmother's wheelchair down a foggy pier in the middle of the night and into the water. This cold, surreal moment, positioned between care and danger, serves as the emotional and visual anchor for the narrative world. It was conceived as the film's opening sequence, intended to immediately engage the viewer by presenting an act that appears, at first glance, unsettling or even sinister. This moment introduces central narrative questions: Who is the girl? Who is the elderly woman? What circumstances have led to this action? Rather than relying on exposition, the scene was designed to establish tension through atmosphere and implication, inviting the audience into a mystery that would gradually unfold.

The decision to frame the short film entirely from Jane's perspective was central to the narrative strategy. Her point of view functions not only as the primary lens through which the unfolding mystery is perceived, but also as a means of emotionally situating the viewer within her experience. Jane is a character shaped by disconnection: culturally, emotionally, and socially. As a second-generation Korean Canadian teenager, she navigates an environment where she feels isolated from her peers, misunderstood at home, and disconnected from any clear sense of identity.

The short film structure required an early disruption of Jane's carefully managed routine to establish the emotional and narrative tension at the core of her character arc. This rupture is articulated through her strained interactions with Mrs. Johnson and her classmate Laura, which highlight Jane's social disconnection and discomfort in everyday settings. These encounters also serve to introduce a more assertive and confrontational dimension of Jane's character, one that propels her to challenge the boundaries imposed by her environment in pursuit of the hidden truth surrounding her mother. This narrative pivot initiates a gradual tonal transition, shifting from domestic unease to a mood of quiet suspense, in keeping with the grounded science fiction aesthetic of the piece.

As the narrative unfolds, the short film gradually introduces elements of mystery and suspense that serve as key devices in adapting the broader series concept into a more contained, character-driven story. Jane's discovery of a strange creature inhabiting her home marks the beginning of this shift, creating a tonal and emotional dissonance that invites the viewer to question what lies beneath the surface of her ordinary environment. The revelation of Jane's daily injections and the unusual birthmark on the back of her neck, resembling the imprint of an octopus sucker, adds layers of tension and foreshadowing. These clues, embedded in visual detail rather than exposition, build toward her encounter with an unfamiliar elderly woman whose possessions, including Haenyeo diving tools and traditional clothing, further deepen the narrative mystery. The eventual recognition that the creature is her own grandmother catalyzes a range of emotional responses: disbelief, fear, and anger, followed by a gradual and conflicted process of acceptance. This progression mirrors the adaptation's goal of balancing

speculative elements with intimate emotional stakes, allowing the film to convey a sense of inherited transformation through restrained, atmospheric storytelling.

Following the emotional turning point in which Jane begins to understand her connection to the creature, the narrative briefly departs from the present to provide historical and cultural context. This shift was designed to emphasize the Haenyeo not only as a thematic anchor but as the cultural and emotional foundation of the story. The flashback sequence, prompted by the visual cue of the shared birthmark, transports the viewer to Jeju Island in 1950, where a young Young-Sook stands on the margins of her community. Her transformation has already begun to isolate her, positioning her as different even within a collective known for its endurance and strength. In this moment of uncertainty, a group of fellow Haenyeo, who carry the same secret, appear beside her, signalling a quiet act of solidarity. This sequence draws inspiration from the portrayal of intergenerational female relationships in Lisa See's *The Island of Sea Women*, where mutual care, sacrifice, and resistance form the emotional core of the narrative. Here, the flashback offers a glimpse into the long lineage of strength and difference that Jane is only beginning to uncover.

As the emotional arc reaches its resolution, Jane forms an unexpected bond with her grandmother, only to discover her mother's plan to remove the elder from their lives. This revelation catalyzes Jane's decision to act independently for the first time. In the final scene, she leads her grandmother to the water and frees her, allowing them both to disappear into the lake. This concluding image preserves ambiguity, suggesting not only an act of liberation but also raising the unresolved question of Jane's potential for transformation. Thematically, the ending reaffirms the story's central concerns with

inheritance, secrecy, and agency. Visually and symbolically, it sets the stage for the project's next layer of inquiry: how speculative elements such as transformation can be represented within a grounded aesthetic framework.

8. Designing the Visual World of *The Haenyeo Project*

To understand the creative process behind its visual world-building, it is necessary to return to the project's earliest phase, its conception as a high-concept television series. Before the short film adaptation took shape, the narrative was developed with a serialized, multi-generational arc in mind. This early phase called for a cohesive visual language that could bridge grounded realism with speculative elements. Drawing on visual pitch conventions and industry-standard tools, a Look Book was created to distill tone, setting, character dynamics, and visual references into a unified document. It clarified the project's direction and made its broader potential legible to collaborators and potential supporters.



Figure 4. Camilo Rodriguez, Composite image, Look Book cover, featuring Jung Ho-Yeon (photograph by Elite Model), Kim Julja (photograph by Hyung S. Kim), and underwater background (image licensed from Shutterstock), 2025. Used for illustrative purposes only.

One of the most influential references in the development of the Look Book was the original series bible for *Montauk*⁸, the project that would later evolve into *Stranger Things*. Created by the Duffer Brothers, the Montauk bible functioned as more than a pitch document; it was a carefully crafted world full of tonal references, character breakdowns, visual language, and thematic anchors. Its ability to balance concept, emotion, and atmosphere offered a compelling model for how to render *The Haenyeo Project* both coherent and immersive at an early stage of development.

Like *Montauk*, *The Haenyeo Project* operates within a grounded sci-fi space where speculative elements are woven into real-world settings and emotional stakes are always prioritized over spectacle. Both stories revolve around a young protagonist confronting a hidden truth about their family and identity, while external forces close in. The Duffer Brothers' use of small-town isolation, government secrecy, and generational trauma parallels many of the thematic concerns explored in *The Haenyeo Project*, though approached through a cross-cultural lens informed by postwar Korean history and diasporic memory.

While *Stranger Things* draws heavily from '80s Americana and Spielbergian nostalgia, *The Haenyeo Project* moves in a different direction, one that is quieter, darker, and more emotionally restrained. Visually, the project is influenced by East Asian minimalism, cold coastal palettes, and the stark beauty of isolation. It draws from the lyrical, melancholic atmosphere of films like *The Shape of Water* by Guillermo del Toro, where tenderness and monstrosity coexist in a single body; the class-conscious tension

⁸ The Duffer Brothers, "Montauk TV Series Bible", In Screencraft.org, Accessed October 2023. https://screencraft.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/StrangerThings_Bible.pdf

and visual precision of *Parasite* by Bong Joon Ho, where domestic spaces become charged with invisible histories; and the unsettling tone of *Yellowjackets*, created by Ashley Lyle and Bart Nickerson, which similarly uses female adolescence, secrecy, and survival as the basis for psychological and genre-driven storytelling.

At their core, *The Haenyeo Project* and these works all share a fundamental interest in uncovering the supernatural or extraordinary within the rhythms of everyday life. Transformation, mystery, or horror emerge not from otherworldly settings, but from ordinary characters living quiet, often constrained lives. Whether it's a janitor forming a bond with a creature in a government lab (*The Shape of Water*), a poor family infiltrating the lives of the wealthy (*Parasite*), or teenage girls surviving trauma in the wilderness (*Yellowjackets*), these stories mine emotional depth from mundane realities turned upside down. *The Haenyeo Project* similarly finds its magic in the margins: in a bathtub, in a quiet grandmother, in the silence between generations, where something extraordinary has always been waiting, just below the surface.



Figure 5. wIHao, *A Deep Dream*. Licensed from Shutterstock, accessed October 2023. <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/deep-dream-1179231613>

9. Staring Down the Beast: The Reality of Pre-Production

There is a moment in every project when the creative vision, once fluid, imaginative, and filled with possibility, suddenly solidifies into something real, tangible, and terrifying. For *The Haenyeo Project*, that moment arrived during pre-production when what began as an idea rooted in myth and memory started to materialize in the form of call sheets, equipment lists, contracts, and weather forecasts. It was like standing face-to-face with a creature I had summoned without fully grasping its scale. Every narrative decision made during development now required a practical solution: could I find the right locations or afford the necessary equipment? Was it even feasible to tell this story with the resources available? Pre-production became the collision point between vision and reality, where artistic ambition had to be reconciled with the limits of time, budget, and human energy. It was at this stage that another key question began to emerge, the one that signals the transformation from idea into reality. What does it take to translate the ambitions of grounded science fiction into a feasible student film? A combination of factors proved essential to navigating the demands of the production: immersive, participatory research conducted in Jeju Island; a strategic approach to casting that aimed to elevate the project's quality; careful prioritization of key elements within the constraints of a limited budget, particularly the design and fabrication of prosthetics; and a focused investment in safety, coordination, and planning for the complex water-based sequences. Above all, assembling a committed and highly skilled team would play a crucial role in translating the project's vision to the screen.

Shooting in Jeju: The Story Begins at Sea

The first step in the pre-production process led back to the origin of the story: Jeju Island. This decision was motivated by both logistical considerations and a deeper personal and ethical imperative. From a production standpoint, the Jeju sequence posed the greatest number of challenges: filming abroad, working with multiple Haenyeo performers, navigating linguistic and cultural barriers, and ensuring sensitivity in representation. By tackling the most complex and delicate portion of the shoot first, the project would confront its greatest uncertainties head-on. More importantly, the trip offered a unique immersive in the very world that inspired the narrative. It also demanded engagement with one of the central ethical questions embedded in this project: How can a male Colombian filmmaker responsibly navigate the ethical and creative challenges of representing a culturally specific, female-centered narrative while drawing from personal experiences of migration and dislocation? Meeting the Haenyeo in person, listening to their stories, observing their rituals, and witnessing the physical demands of their lives provided an essential grounding. This experience offered a tangible, lived dimension to the narrative, one that could not be approximated from a distance, and became foundational to shaping a more responsible and resonant approach to the fictionalization of their legacy.

The flashback scene was conceived with the understanding that it would require a minimal crew and limited technical resources. It had to be executed with a small team, natural light, no dialogue, and handheld camera work. The goal was to remain nimble and unobtrusive, to capture the emotional texture of the moment without overcomplicating the shoot. Yet, the most significant challenge was not logistical, but cultural. Early in the

planning process, I was cautioned that involving Haenyeo performers would be difficult. Their skepticism, entirely justified, stemmed from a long history of being documented by outsiders without meaningful engagement or consent. Too often, they had been treated as subjects rather than collaborators, and establishing trust was paramount. Fortunately, through a series of fortuitous connections, we met Young-Sook, a local resident whose name coincidentally mirrored that of the grandmother's character. Although not a producer by trade, she had assisted on several productions and, more importantly, held the trust and affection of the Haenyeo community. Her longstanding relationships and cultural fluency made her an invaluable ally in bridging the gap between the production and the women at the heart of the story.

The search for the young version of Grandma required someone who could convey emotional nuance on camera and feel at ease in the ocean. Juli, though not a trained actress, was recommended by Young-Sook, who believed she had the presence the role demanded. What stood out most was the contrast between her warm, lively demeanour in real life and the quiet depth in her gaze when performing. Juli possessed a kind of inherited melancholy that aligned seamlessly with the emotional gravity of the character.



Figure 6. Ana Casas, Behind-the-scenes Photograph of Juli Han, Jeju Island, South Korea, August 2024. Unpublished. Used with permission.

With the lead actress confirmed, the next step involved securing the participation of four *Halmeonis*, elder Haenyeo, willing to appear in the film. Not only did they agree to take part, but they also facilitated access to a collection of traditional Haenyeo costumes, garments typically worn during an annual parade that honours Jeju Island's centuries-old diving heritage.

There were numerous moving parts (logistical, creative, and cultural), but the production came together with notable cohesion. When the shooting day arrived, despite the intense summer heat, preparations were in place. Filming began early with the beach sequences: Juli, portraying the young Young-Sook, was staged alongside the *Halmeonis* on the rocks with the sea behind them, followed by a solitary walk along the shoreline, framed by the horizon. After a midday break, production moved to the Jeju Stone Culture Park to film the indoor sequence set in a traditional house, where Young-Sook lights incense at the altar of her deceased husband. Before filming the final scenes, a small prosthetic, shaped like the mark left by an octopus sucker, was carefully applied to the back of Juli's neck. This subtle yet significant visual cue reinforced the film's speculative undertone, illustrating how grounded science fiction can recontextualize everyday environments through the introduction of minimal but meaningful anomalies. As the afternoon light softened, the final sequence was captured: Young-Sook's solitary walk through the village and into the volcanic hills. The black stone paths, wind-swept grasses, and measured rhythm of her steps contributed to a quiet visual poetry. In these moments, the resilience of the Haenyeo, the spirit of the land, and the legacy of the women who inspired the story were made visually and emotionally present.

Building Momentum: From Design to Crew

Upon returning to Toronto from Jeju, the pace of pre-production accelerated significantly. Several key components began to unfold in parallel, each playing an essential role in shaping the final project. One of the first and most time-sensitive tasks was the development of the creature prosthetics. After determining that producing the prosthetics in Canada exceeded the available budget, alternative solutions were explored. The most viable option involved commissioning the design and fabrication of the prosthetics in Colombia, where production costs were lower, and subsequently shipping them to Toronto to be applied on set by a local FX makeup artist. I partnered with Corium FX, a specialized Colombian studio that became instrumental in translating the conceptual design into practical makeup effects. The creative direction for the prosthetics was rooted in the ecology of Jeju Island, with the design drawing inspiration from native marine species such as abalone, octopus, conch, sea cucumber, and incorporated the textures of seaweed and coral. The transformation was conceived not as a dramatic fantasy element, but as a slow, internal mutation: an evolutionary adaptation that appeared to erupt from within, altering the character's skin, eyes, nose, and respiratory system to enable underwater survival. From that point onward, the prosthetic work became a constant thread running in the background of pre-production, unfolding steadily alongside other critical efforts.

One of the most significant challenges during pre-production was location scouting, particularly for Jane's house, which serves as the central setting for much of the short film. In retrospect, a critical miscalculation was envisioning a space that far exceeded our budgetary constraints. While writing the script, I had in mind a modern,

minimalist, mid-century modern house: sleek, open, and architecturally precise. This style wasn't just an aesthetic preference; it aligned closely with the clean, methodical, and extremely organized personality of Jane's mother. The space was meant to visually reflect her character, reinforcing the story's psychological undertones. Unfortunately, finding a location that matched this vision within our means proved nearly impossible, forcing compromises that diluted the intended atmosphere. When working within real, lived-in spaces, spatial limitations quickly reveal themselves, particularly in terms of lighting setups, camera movement, and pacing. Once we found a house that met most of our needs, the next challenge became adapting the original shot list to the actual geography of the space, striving to preserve the tone and rhythm of the sequences while embracing the constraints of the environment.

The water scenes introduced a distinct set of challenges. Balancing the safety and comfort of cast and crew with the visual and atmospheric demands of the narrative proved complex, particularly within the constraints of a student film budget. Suitable locations had to be both accessible and visually compelling, while also offering conditions that could be managed with limited resources. These combined requirements significantly reduced the available options. The logistical and creative strategies adopted to address these challenges will be examined in greater detail in the following chapter.

A pivotal moment in casting occurred when actress Jean Yoon, best known as *Umma* from *Kim's Convenience*⁹, accepted the role of the Grandmother. This opportunity emerged through Karen Walton's *Selected Topics in Screenwriting* course, taken during

⁹ *Kim's Convenience*, Season One, created by Ins Choi (Thunderbird Films, 2016), <https://gem.cbc.ca/kims-convenience>

the Winter Term of 2024. As part of a class exercise, students were invited to envision their ideal cast; Yoon's name was included at that time as an aspirational choice. Unbeknownst to me, Karen and Jean shared a longstanding friendship. Karen subsequently shared the project's Look Book, originally created for the television series concept, which served as Jean's initial introduction to the narrative world. Her involvement lent both momentum and credibility to the project, significantly advancing the broader casting process.

One week later, the first meeting was held with Bonnie Whitehall, who would ultimately serve as the film's Line Producer. At that stage, only the Director of Photography, Will Vela, a frequent collaborator from Colombia, had been confirmed. Bonnie's involvement brought much-needed organizational structure to the production, including the development of scheduling frameworks and coordination across departments. Concurrently, Jean Yoon's participation contributed to a connection with Millie Tom, an experienced Casting Director whose guidance led to the selection of Angela Son for the role of Jane. Angela, who had recently completed a lead role in *Gangnam Project* (CBC Gem)¹⁰, demonstrated the emotional complexity and quiet resilience the role required. With Millie's continued support, the team also cast Pip Dwyer as Mrs. Johnson and, through a targeted outreach to Seneca College, discovered Mackenzie Jury for the role of Laura. The completion of the ensemble cast marked a key moment in establishing the film's emotional and relational foundation.

¹⁰ *Gangnam Project*, Season One, created by Sarah Haasz and Romeo Candido (Pillango Productions and Aircraft Pictures, 2024), <https://gem.cbc.ca/gangnam-project>

As pre-production drew to a close, the beast that once felt abstract or distant had become immediate and concrete. Every logistical decision, creative compromise, and moment of uncertainty had culminated in this point of convergence, where planning would soon give way to execution. The world of *The Haenyeo Project* was no longer theoretical; it was mapped onto real locations, embodied by committed performers, and supported by a team ready to bring it to life. This stage marked the culmination of a complex balancing act, where creative ambition met logistical constraint, and the foundational strategies for realizing a grounded science fiction story within the scope of a student production were put to the test. With these elements now in motion, the next phase could begin. The beast had arrived. There was no turning back.

10. A Beast Emerges: The Shoot Begins

Water was never just a setting in *The Haenyeo Project*: it was a central character. It represented both origin and danger, inheritance and rupture. As the story evolved from script to screen, water became a structuring force, not only narratively, but visually and logistically. Its presence shaped the emotional stakes and guided the stylistic language of the film. The short opens and closes with water; it soaks the domestic spaces, hovers around the characters' memories, and ultimately becomes the site of transformation. For a story grounded in intergenerational trauma and bodily mutation, water was the most resonant symbol, and also the greatest production challenge.

From the early stages of writing, the bathtub was conceived as a defining space, rusted, enclosed, and emotionally charged, that offered a location both cinematic and symbolically aligned with the film's grounded science fiction aesthetic. Although the scenes in which Jane administered her injections took place in a separate bathroom, the recurring use of this domestic space functioned as a visual and thematic throughline: a site of transformation, concealment, and psychological tension. Its presence anchored the story's domestic unease while subtly foreshadowing the bodily changes that propelled the narrative. This spatial choice was both aesthetic and strategic, allowing speculative elements to emerge organically within otherwise ordinary settings. This approach echoed the work of Guillermo del Toro, whose fantastical creatures often entered the world through familiar environments, making the uncanny feel intimate. In a similar manner, *The Haenyeo Project* framed transformation not as spectacle but as something tactile and insidious, as if the house itself were haunted not by spirits, but by memory and submerged truths.

This aesthetic objective carried concrete implications. It informed decisions related to lighting (used to establish a visual distinction between Jane's domestic environment and other narrative spaces), production design (minimal yet intentional), and camera movement, which favoured fluid, dynamic compositions where feasible. Collectively, these choices constituted a practical response to the central research question guiding the production process: what creative and logistical strategies support the realization of grounded science fiction within the constraints of a student film production? In *The Haenyeo Project*, water was both a poetic idea and a production limitation. Navigating that duality became one of the most defining tasks of the shoot.

The House that Held the Tide

Securing a single house location that could accommodate the visual and narrative needs of *The Haenyeo Project* was both a logistical victory and a creative compromise. The residence chosen for the shoot was large, slightly eclectic, and filled with vintage character. These features allowed it to serve as more than just Jane's home. With its distinct rooms, textured interiors, and varied colour palettes, the house became a multi-functional space, doubling as Laura's home as well. Each environment required its own emotional and aesthetic tone, and the diversity of the rooms made that distinction possible. One of the most serendipitous discoveries was the guest room, with its faded teal wallpaper, a perfect visual echo of the ocean and a fitting backdrop for Grandma's arrival. Its aquatic hue became a quiet but potent cue to her submerged identity, hinting at a world Jane had yet to uncover.

The transition from script to screen required significant geographic recalibration. Several scenes, particularly those involving suspense or transformation, had been conceived with an idealized layout in mind, where blocking and camera placement were integral to the intended rhythm. The real geography of the chosen house introduced spatial constraints that required adjustments to the shot list and choreography. Rather than resisting these limitations, the production adapted by embracing tighter framing, more intimate compositions, and a visual language of restriction that paralleled Jane's emotional containment. The use of anamorphic lenses proved especially effective, enabling more balanced and expansive compositions while maximizing spatial depth within the confined interior. Their characteristic wide horizontal field of view allowed for the inclusion of environmental textures and architectural details that enriched the film's atmosphere. Additionally, the subtle optical distortions and oval bokeh produced by the lenses contributed to a heightened cinematic quality, reinforcing the film's blend of grounded realism and speculative tension.

Costume design also played a critical role in articulating the interior emotional world of the characters. Jane's wardrobe leaned into earthy tones, particularly a mustard yellow sweater that became her visual signature. It offered a subtle homage to Bong Joon-ho's *Barking Dogs Never Bite*¹¹, a film whose textured realism and offbeat tone were early references for the project. In contrast, Grandma's palette centred around blues and greens, echoing the natural tones of the sea and setting her apart as a figure rooted in another world. The costume choices not only provided a visual distinction between

¹¹ Bong Joon-Ho, dir. *Barking Dogs Never Bite* (Magnolia Pictures, 2000), <https://www.kanopy.com/en/product/barking-dogs-never-bite-0?vp=evpl>.

generations but also symbolized the internal tension between land and sea, control and transformation.

Among the most symbolically charged props in the film was Grandma's bag. Brought from Korea and filled with traditional Haenyeo garments, diving tools, and personal items, the bag operated as both a narrative device and a thematic vessel. For Jane, its contents were as foreign as they were familiar. They were artifacts of a hidden lineage and an embodied history she had never been told. The bag's textures, colours, and weathered materials introduced the sensory world of the Haenyeo into the sterile atmosphere of Jane's household. It served as a kind of breach, an object that carried the sea inside it, blurring the boundary between the domestic and the mythic.

The Night Water Scene

The lake sequence marked both the emotional and logistical apex of *The Haenyeo Project*. Narratively, it was the moment of rupture, where secrecy gave way to revelation, and Jane, no longer a passive observer, made the decision to act. It is in this scene that the speculative core of the story fully surfaces: the dormant lineage embodied by her grandmother emerges from the depths, confronting Jane with a truth she can no longer avoid. But translating this emotional climax into a feasible shoot, especially under the constraints of a student film, required creative adaptation and rigorous planning.

The scene was initially conceived as a night shoot, but the complexity of filming open water in darkness with limited lighting equipment, safety concerns, and tight resources called for a more pragmatic solution. Instead, a Day for Night approach was

opted for, combining on-camera filters and subtle underexposure with a carefully planned colour-grading workflow. This choice aligned with the grounded science fiction aesthetic that guided the film from the beginning: it allowed for controlled conditions while maintaining the uncanny, dreamlike atmosphere required by the story. The filtered daylight gave the lake an eerie, timeless quality, reinforcing the narrative shift into a more speculative register without relying too much on visual effects or expensive gear.

Safety remained a primary concern throughout the planning and execution of the water scenes. Cold temperatures, shifting weather conditions, and the physical vulnerability of both cast and crew presented significant challenges. A stunt coordinator was engaged to choreograph key moments of contact, particularly the interaction between Jane and Grandma in the water, to ensure both performer safety and emotional clarity in the staging. Additionally, a certified lifeguard was present on set, and a support boat was secured to assist with safety supervision and camera movement. Each decision was informed by a careful assessment of the physical and psychological demands placed on the performers, who were required to deliver nuanced performances while immersed in prosthetics within an unpredictable and unforgiving environment.

The final result, achieved with a modest budget and unwavering will, reflects not only the narrative stakes of the film but also the spirit in which it was made: rooted in realism, elevated by mystery, and made possible by a collective belief in the story's emotional truth. The special effects makeup contributed significantly to the film's grounded science fiction aesthetic, rendering a bodily transformation that felt both organic and plausibly linked to Jeju's natural environment and traumatic historical events. The performances across generations embodied the psychological weight and shifting

responsibilities inherited within the family, offering nuanced portrayals that aligned with the film's core themes of care, secrecy, and identity. The project also represents a conscious attempt, as a male Colombian filmmaker, to engage with Korean female-centered narratives through research, humility, and deep respect for the Haenyeo communities. The characters, shaped through this cross-cultural lens, conveyed the emotional undercurrents of dislocation, generational disconnect, and the search for belonging. Finally, the production's success was made possible by strategic resource allocation and the expertise of a committed team whose technical knowledge and creative instincts elevated each element on screen.

11. Conclusion: Reflections and Future Vision

The process of developing *The Haenyeo Project*, from early conceptual stages through production and post-production, offered a profound education in both storytelling and creative problem-solving. At its core, this was a project about inheritance: not only in narrative terms, where three generations of women confront a shared and painful legacy, but also in the way the filmmaking process passed through cycles of discovery, adaptation, and resilience. Each stage brought challenges that demanded both practical solutions and emotional clarity. Reflecting on this journey offers an opportunity to evaluate what was gained, what was learned, and where the project may go from here.

One of the most important lessons was how critical it is to align artistic vision with production feasibility, recognizing limitations while striving to maximize creative outcomes within those boundaries. Writing with a real location in mind, rather than an idealized one, would have saved time and energy during pre-production. Similarly, early attention to scheduling and interdepartmental coordination would have helped prevent last-minute compromises. At the same time, many of the creative constraints led to valuable discoveries. The choice to embrace a grounded science fiction aesthetic not only made the project feasible but also deepened its emotional resonance.

As a stand-alone piece, the short film serves multiple purposes. It introduces a compelling world, grounded in emotional specificity and cultural texture, while offering a clear tonal and aesthetic vision. More importantly, it functions as a character-driven proof-of-concept that gestures toward a much larger narrative universe. The intergenerational tension, the gradual emergence of speculative elements, and the thematic exploration of secrecy, transformation, and reconciliation, all point toward a serialized structure with

room to grow. In this way, the short doesn't attempt to compress the series but instead offers a glimpse into its potential.

Looking ahead, the next step is to build upon this foundation. The ambition remains to develop *The Haenyeo Project* into a full-length television series. Moving forward, the development of a solid TV series bible, pilot episode script, and pitch materials will be central. Film festivals and curated industry screenings might also be key venues for introducing the project to a wider professional network.

Ultimately, this thesis has served not only to test the limits of what is achievable within the framework of a student production but also to lay the foundations for what might emerge beyond it. In combining cultural research, speculative storytelling, and personal themes of identity, migration, and belonging, *The Haenyeo Project* has become more than a short film; it is the seed of a larger creative and ethical inquiry. The story, grounded in the intergenerational dynamics of a single family, aspires to resonate across borders and contexts. At its core remain the Haenyeo themselves: not only as symbolic figures of resilience and transformation, but as real individuals whose legacy continues to evolve.

Any continuation of this project, whether through further production, community engagement, or series development, will require a renewed commitment to dialogue, research, and cultural accountability. In this sense, the project remains open: a space for ongoing learning and deeper collaboration with the communities that inspired it. For me, as the filmmaker behind it, *The Haenyeo Project* marks a big step forward on a larger pursuit, one that seeks to solidify a narrative voice rooted in empathy, formal ambition, and the conviction that storytelling, when approached with care, can be both a bridge and a mirror.

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